

The era when the difference between our digital lives and what used to refer to as IRL or “in real life” are long gone. In today’s world, there are two sides of the same coin. We upload the actions we do offline and we talk about what we have read or heard online with our friends, work partners, and families. These critics claim is causing destruction across our society. We now sleepless, we are becoming more nervous, we argue a lot and eventually becoming less aware of reality.

Therefore, are we going to ignore the dash of complete civilizational collapse? Well so far, an American neuroscientist and the author Maryanne Wolf doesn’t think so. An expert on the “reading brain,” said she has noticed what the digital dependence can do to human’s ability to sit immobile and focus on one thing for over five minutes. This has extreme social consequences: one of the best approaches to predicting if a child will finish their education or end up in prison is through early literacy testing.

The expert affirms that such problems can be solved. The answers won't be gotten in a romantic back-to-nature movement that rejects all the things that are digital. Rather, we need to pay rapt attention to the way we are teaching children how to read and hence think in a more thorough persistent way. This skill can be enhanced through both digital and analog media. The trick is identifying which method works in which setting and why it works.

Reading is a skill that we learn as our brains improve instead of inborn ability.

A human brain is an incredible machine that is capable of doing different types of astonishing things. Some of those things are inborn, meaning we are born with the genes that make our bodies and minds gain specific natural abilities without us being taught about it. For instance, most people come to the world with an inborn ability to see, hear and the ability to understand a language. Just imagine the way in which children learn how to speak in a sponge-like manner by mimicking the words they hear from people around them.

Reading is completely different. In contrast to speaking, reading is not hardwired into the brain. Therefore, this makes it similar to our ability to comprehend and manipulate numbers which is more of a cultural invention than an inborn ability. Our forefathers only started to read about 6,000 years ago which makes it a very new addition to the cognitive toolkit in the structure of human evolution. Therefore, how did they learn to read and how do we learn too?

We need to understand the fundamentals of neuroscience in order to answer that question. When we learn to read, the brain develops a new network particularly designed for that task. This is a result of the brain's neuroplasticity which is the ability to restructure and redirect existing neuronal networks in order for it to create completely new ones

This kind of cerebral construction work is continuous throughout our lives. The brain is regularly connecting cells clusters up in unique ways. Every single cluster within these configurations concurrently works to help a promising skill like reading which forms a new network. That process is sped up by the brain's ability to use formed networks that perform adjacent functions. For example, reading uses cell clusters connected with language and vision.

However, due to the reason that networks are formed in response to certain needs rather than being derived from some type of mental scheme, we all develop little different neuronal networks. What these neuronal networks look like is based on what we are reading and the language we are using to read it. This means that the circuitry in the head of someone who reads words in characters like the Chinese speaker will be structured differently than that of someone who uses alphabets like an English or Arabic speaker.

Another meaning for neuroplasticity is that our ability to read evolves over time. In the next chapters, we will see how it is evolving in reaction to the digital age.

Our deep-reading abilities are being changed by the digital age, and they are more essential now than ever.

If you have ever glanced through a magazine or scan through a newspaper, you will know that it's a different experience as attentive close reading. Therefore, what is the main difference? Let us examine deep reading.

As its name implies, it is a type of reading which digs deeper into texts rather than just glancing through them. Additionally, it produces a number of unique processes. When we deeply read, we create images that help our understanding even if these images aren't clear in the text we read.

Let us consider Ernest Hemingway's popular six-word short story: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" in order to understand how this works. It is very short, however, the picture of that unnecessary footwear explains it. The reader could not help but to imagine the excited parents-to-be who bought shoes for a baby who was never born or died in its infancy. That is a good example of how we use our knowledge of the world to understand what we are reading.

When pictures activate inferences about a wider story in this way, a different deep-reading process occurs which is called perspective-taking. As we picture the part Hemingway's story intentionally leaves out, we end up putting ourselves in the story and engaging in what the John S. Dunne a theologian refers to as "passing over". This simply means seeing things from the shoes' owner's point of view and restructuring how they feel and their thoughts.

This kind of compassion is exceptional to reading which is a practice that enables us to see the world through various perspectives and empathize with what a person is going through. This is summed up by what Dunne calls "coming back." When we regain our habitual first-person view, we notice that our feeling of empathy has been increased by our experience of considering another person's perspective.

However, here is the more concerning thing, the less we engage in deep reading the less empathetic we become. There is evidence to prove that. Let us look at a study that was conducted in 2011 by Stanford University which observed empathy among college students. The result of the study was that empathy had reduced among young people by 40% over the last two decades and particularly over the last 10 years.

Also, Sherry Turkle from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology sets these findings down to increased online activity in which people are removed from real-life relationships. This alters the way in which people relate to one another and our ability to empathize with them.

Our attention is much more fragmented, which prevents deep reading.

We have just realized how our dependence on the latest tech can affect the way we think about others, however, that is not just the only sign of the terminally online. Also, we are losing our ability to read deeply.

Previously, people use to digest the whole information. They would read a whole novel or a huge part of the daily newspaper. This has changed. Our attention has now reduced while our urge for data has now increased. The University of San Diego's Global Information Industry Center estimated that the majority of us consume up to 34 gigabytes of information every day which is approximately 100,000 words.

Reading those words we find on digital devices is different from reading a book of the same length. Today we only read in short and skim through from one topic to the other. One of the professors named Roger Bohn involved in that study asserts that our attention is being separated into shorter intervals.

As expected, that is not a good thing for our reading ability and our ability to think deeply. The author has experienced the surprising effects of that loss firsthand. As she struggled to keep up with the number of digital data she had to create and consume daily as she found herself spending more and more time with emails. The stack of books by her bedside that was once a source of joy to her started becoming dusty.

It was a strange position – after all, here was a researcher specializing in the reading brain becoming a target to the very trends she'd discussed in her own work! She decided to use herself as the lab rat, she created an experiment which was rereading her best book, Hermann

Hesse's *Magister Ludi*. She thought that would give her an understanding of just how much her brain's circuitry had evolved.

What was her result? Her experiment was unsuccessful; she couldn't finish the book on her first trial. Its old charms had subsided: the plot was irritatingly slow, the language was very complicated, and the overall effect was one of impenetrable density. Sentences she had once read fast suddenly became confusing to her and she had to patiently and slowly reread.

This wasn't the fault of the book; instead, it was as a result of her deep reading skills being reduced. However, here is the hopeful part: after two weeks of determination, she was eventually able to adjust her brain and revive her old skills!

Children are extremely vulnerable to fragmented attention spans, which has a detrimental effect on their brains.

Multitasking is now the new normal. There is actually a good intention for that: our brains like the swift change between different tasks. Why? You can call it a novelty bias which is an inborn cognitive selection for anything new and attention grasping.

Also, because changing from one thing to the other activates the brains' reward center, therefore, multitasking is part of an addictive cycle. This is in contrast to the slow relief happiness we derive from paying continuous attention to something, a habit that needs patience and cautious training.

It is even more difficult for children to resist such short-term rewards. This is due to the fact that their brains are still evolving. Before they get to maturity, their prefrontal cortex which is the part of the brain that in control of attention doesn't have a sound understanding of long-term rewards yet. Also, children's brains are not so good at engaging in the kind of self-control that you have to overcome immediate reward.

In order to strengthen this, digital devices can be used. Moving from an app to a video clip to a website and back again comes naturally to a brain that does not have full control over its own

novelty bias yet. The outcome from the neuroscientist and the author Daniel Levitin, is overstimulation, an accumulation of data sources that strive for kids' attention.

This is the beginning of a vicious cycle. All that stimulation activates the production of hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline that are responsible for the stress and the fight-or-flight response. A young child that spends a lot of time in the nervous stage will eventually become addicted to ever-increasing doses of stimulation.

Here is the fact; recently children spend a lot of time on these digital devices. A report conducted in 2015 by the American think tank RAND Corporation proved that. In their study, it was revealed that 75% of the children up to the age of eight have access to a digital device which is a 52% increase compared to the result of two years earlier. Averagely, children aged 3-5 years spent up to four hours daily on those devices.

These statistics are concerning. Therefore, how can we make sure that the following generation doesn't do this irreversible damage to their brains? Let's look at how we can do this.

Parents who read to their children enable their children to develop more than screens could ever do.

What was your favorite memory as a child? One experience that is mostly the best to a lot of people is listening to their parents reading them a bedtime story. This is not just a pleasing habit of childhood; it also helps develop children's cognitive aspects.

Therefore, how does this function? The first thing to consider is that it is a relieving, tactile experience to sit on your parents' lap and let their words flow to you. This also leaves a positive emotional connection in the child's brain with features of reading like attention, memory, and language. Also, there is something known as shared attention which is the ability to concentrate on the same object as another person without affecting your own curiosity. Paying attention to a story that is being read out loud is a good way of developing that skill.

Reading the same stories over and over again also serves as a benefit. Over time, children who have been read the same stories repeatedly learn new words and concepts. All these

accumulated knowledge becomes a lot when the child starts reading on their own around the age of five. This is because repetition enables them to concentrate their attention fully of various aspects of the story and the language in which the story is being told. In the long run, they will start to make an association between sounds, shapes of letters and patterns of letters in diverse words.

On the contrary, digital devices do not aid the same kinds of connections. A video or an app might be capable of reading a story but it can never replace a parent. This is the reason why the voice does not resonate with the child's emotional connections and there is no sense of touch to support the positive parts of the experience. Also, adults play an additional role that devices cannot imitate: through guiding their children's attention, they assist them to connect the dots between spoken and written language.

There is a lot of scientific data from the 1970s to suppose those claims. For instance, a study by developmental psychologists indicates that children who learn the majority of their words from an actual person have the tendency of performing better in aspects of linguistic development. As a matter of fact, nothing foretells whether a child will become a proficient reader as efficiently as whether they were read to as a child.

In the United States, there is a crisis in reading which is why it's essential for children of all ages to get support.

That was the conclusion of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey that was conducted in 2003. According to its research, it was revealed that in the United States about 93 million people can only read at or below a basic level. However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that 60% of American fourth-graders kids aged 9-10 aren't fully proficient readers.

The concern here isn't only on the fact that children are missing out on the good book, but also poor level of literacy has a negative effect on society. A philanthropist named Cinthia Coletti who is also the author of Blueprint for a Literate Nation indicated that there a clear causal

association between fourth-grade reading levels and the possibility of students dropping out of school later in life.

That association between literacy and social outcomes in later life is very established that state Bureaus of Prisons across the United States use statistical data on reading levels in order to estimate the number of prison beds it will need.

Thus, what is the best approach to this crisis? It is essential that kids are assisted while learning how to read both at home and in school. Recently, that is not the case. One of the causes, why fourth grade becomes such a sticking point for a lot of pupils, is that the educational bar is set high at that point. Children are unexpectedly faced with further challenging material that the teachers presume they are able to read without support.

This can become very challenging for kids who are not at that point yet specifically if they have special needs as well. Let us consider an example using the author's son. The author's son, Ben was a smart and creative fourth-grader, however, he also had dyslexia. Ben's teacher overlooked his need and he assumes that he and his classmates had been sufficiently prepared to read by their former teachers.

Therefore, his teacher didn't allocate class time to working on reading skills. Due to this, Ben and other students that were struggling became unsatisfied and started acting out.

This situation could have been easily avoided if the teacher had been efficiently prepared to deal with literacy issues and this wasn't the case. In the long run, the majority of these kids' parents decided to transfer their children to another school where more attention was paid to their specific needs. Unfortunately, millions of parents, as well as children, do not have this choice.

In order to get ready for the future, we should nurture children's brains with the best of both worlds.

So far we've seen how changing relationships with information and knowledge is affecting our ability to learn and read. Does that mean we should avoid technology and return back to analog media?

No. A better option is to help kids In order for them to become very fluent in both print and digital channels just like bilingual children who are able to speak two languages fluently. Each channel has its own advantages. For example, when It comes to reading, non-digital mediums are very effective at providing kids with the tools they need to think for themselves. The author asserts that physical books should be the main focus in the first years of schooling.

This is because they are better at nurturing. Those are slower, more thought-frustrating processes than the kind of fast skim-reading that's related to digital media. Ideally, teachers need to pay much attention to the significance of original thinking as they do the other parts of reading. One approach of encouraging that is to return back to the pen and paper method where kids jot down their thoughts. This is a good trick that enables children to take things slowly and gradually think through what they have read.

The other part of this approach would see children being taught about the best aspects of digital culture. For instance, coding and programming are swiftly becoming important skills in today's world. Also, there are creative skills such as making electronic music or graphic art. Deep reading helps kids' intellectual development.

Using coding as an activity that aids sequential, cause-and-effect thinking. It is also the opposite of the fragmented changes among sources that fit with the unmonitored use of digital media. This also helps kids interact vigorously with technology and it gives them the opportunity to express themselves rather than passively using resources formed by others. These skills will become important later on when students focus their attention on STEM subjects; science, technology, engineering, and math.

Through learning with the exceptional advantages of physical books and digital devices have, children, can develop a bi-literate brain that is competent in making a good judgments about what they consume both online and offline.

Guiding our third life as readers maintain our ability to turn knowledge into wisdom.

In the Nicomachean Ethics, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out the three “lives” of a good society: one of it is dedicated to knowledge and productivity, the other to entertainment and the last one to contemplation. That’s a very good representation of the lives of readers.

Just like the members of Aristotle’s society, readers must also balance their three lives together if they want to become their best selves.

This is how it works. The very first life is basically about learning and gathering knowledge maybe by searching for something on google or using a dictionary. The second life readers enjoy the things that are entertaining to them like testing their intelligence as they follow through with the inferences of a detective in a murder case or learning captivating historical facts. This is eventually the life where we look for an escape from everyday stresses.

When combined together, these two lives lead to the third life, the life of contemplation. This is an extremely personal realm where we allow the things we read or the type of genre we read control our thoughts about the world we live in. Being in this third zone enables us to convert the knowledge and experiences we gained in both our first and second lives into wisdom.

This isn’t something that will sort itself out, rather we have to oblige ourselves to this pursuit of wisdom. The third life is like a fragile flower that is required to be gently cultivated which takes time, patience and effort. All these characteristics are few in this our fast-paced digital world.

Due to this realization, a billionaire investor named Warren Buffet went to tell Bill Gates that he should create a lot of free space in his calendar. After Gates endorsed him with this finding,

Buffett brought out a small calendar from his pocket and he said, “time” is the one thing no one can ever buy.

As we progress into a future where digital media will hold a greater role in our lives, the best method of preserving our capacity to read and think deeply may come from making space and time in order to let our thoughts evolve and mature. But this doesn't mean that we should reject the wonders of technology. What is really essential is learning how to get the best from both worlds.

Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World by Maryanne Wolf Book Review

Our ability to read and think deeply enables us to improve a lot of the most essential characteristics of our humanity. Our thought, interest, and sense of empathy are all determined by the cognitive work we do when we are engaged in written material. The arrival of a quick-paced digital culture has reduced such skills.

In today's world, we use more data than before while our attention spans are diminishing. A neo-Luddite elimination of everything related to tech wouldn't be of any help rather we should try to create a more sensitive relationship with these digital devices and get the best of both online and offline worlds.

Assess digital content with your children.

Digital devices as well as the apps that comes with them are all inevitable. Some aids children development while some don't. Hence, how does one choose the former and escape the latter with millions of varieties of apps out there? However, you can start with a little internet research. Another suggestion is participation. When next you download an app for you kids, do not just leave them to it along rather participate and play along with them. That is the simplest and fastest way of determining If the app is something you want your child to get involved in.

<https://goodbooksummary.com/reader-come-home-by-maryanne-wolf-book-summary/>

